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ABSTRACT

It may be suggested that one's reflection on psychology's past and present state is an important part of finding one's identity within psychology. The facilitation of each individual student's quest for identity within psychology may be taken as a fundamental goal of the theories and history of a psychology course. This quest may be stifled if students are allowed to simply become passive sieves of lists of names, dates, and events. Several pedagogical strategies can promote students' search for identity. These include short, in-class, contemplative essays (i.e., "microthemes") which are employed to present a structured means of utilizing certain polarities of psychology (e.g., empiricism versus rationalism) to guide students in clarifying their identity within psychology. The microtheme assignments flow from a presupposition that writing can be used to gain, and not just display, learning. Instructor presentation of model writing samples, peer debates and peer reader-based responses to the microthemes are follow-up strategies which further this search for identity. Finally, a detailed critical analysis assignment offers an opportunity for rewriting and clarification of selected microtheme polarities. A thorough critical analysis allows students to demonstrate the connections between the past, the present, and the future of an idea. (Author/ABL)

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# A PERSONAL RELEVANCE APPROACH TO TEACHING THEORIES AND HISTORY OF PSYCHOLOGY

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## Abstract

The facilitation of each individual student's quest for identity within psychology may be taken as a fundamental goal of the theories and history of psychology course. The present article offers several pedagogical strategies which promote this search for identity within psychology by encouraging students to become active explorers of our rich and fascinating past. Short, in-class, contemplative essays (i.e., "microthemes") are employed to present a structured means of utilizing certain polarities of psychology (e.g., empiricism vs. rationalism) to guide students in clarifying their identity within psychology. Instructor presentation of model writing samples, peer debates and peer reader-based responses to the microthemes are also suggested as follow-up strategies which further this search for identity. Finally, a detailed critical analysis assignment offers an opportunity for rewriting and clarification of selected microtheme polarities.

## A Personal Relevance Approach to Teaching Theories and History of Psychology

Wertheimer (1987) suggests that study of the theories and history of psychology is beneficial because it: (a) extends our horizons beyond our own limited sensory experience, (b) provides perspective and humility as we realize that there are points of view different from that to which we are committed, (c) helps us see that the seemingly infinite diversity of the disparate topics that go under the name of psychology may not be quite as much of an accidental hodgepodge of unrelated facts and theories as they first appear, and (d) helps free us from blind, irrational adherence to today's unspoken, implicit assumptions in the field of psychology.

We may also suggest that one's reflection on psychology's past and present state is an important part of finding one's identity within psychology. The facilitation of each individual student's quest for identity within psychology may be taken as a fundamental goal of the theories and history of psychology course. We must acknowledge, however, that this quest may be stifled if students are allowed to simply become passive sieves of lists of names, dates, and events. The present article addresses this obstacle by offering several pedagogical strategies which facilitate the search for identity within psychology by encouraging students to become active explorers of our rich and fascinating past.

### Microtheme Assignments

The practice of "writing to learn" is receiving escalating attention in the undergraduate curriculum. As Zinsser (1988)

suggests, writing organizes and clarifies our thoughts and it is by writing about a subject that we reason our way to what it means.

One of the more common in-class writing assignments is the contemplative essay, muse, or "I Search" assignment. The present article employs short, in-class, contemplative essays (i.e., "microthemes") to present a structured means of utilizing certain polarities of psychology to guide students in clarifying their identity within psychology.

Hilgard (1987) affirms that many of the intricate distinctions among psychological theories and theorists can be made understandable by oversimplifications in which the theories and theorists are classified, compared, and evaluated by their stands on major persisting polarities. Table 1 offers a partial list of such major polarities in the field of psychology (see also Littman, 1979 and Watson, 1971).

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Insert Table 1 about here

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The presentations of the polarities typically occur in the last half-hour of the class session and correspond - as nearly as possible - with that session's lecture focus. For example, the polarity of "Conscious Mentalism vs. Unconscious Mentalism" seems most appropriately placed in the historical context of Freudian psychoanalysis. After questions have been clarified, students are given the final 10-15 minutes of the class period to write a microtheme which conveys their personal position in response to

that polarity.

The microtheme assignments flow from a presupposition that writing can be used to gain - not just display - learning. Since the microthemes are not viewed as products of learning but rather as part of the process of learning, an evaluative grade is not appropriate. Instead, the percentage of completed microthemes is used to determine credit. To receive full credit students must complete 90% of the assigned microthemes. This frees students to miss an assigned microtheme(s) because of an unforeseen class absence(s). It is emphasized, however, that excessive absences (excused or unexcused) or uncompleted microthemes may result in a substantial loss of credit.

Students are also asked to demonstrate in the completed microthemes a satisfactory level of logical consistency, reliable reasoning, and coherent presentation. It is recognized that the restriction of a 10-15 minute in-class writing period may dictate a slight compromise on the quality of these features along with a substantial number of performance-based errors (e.g., misspellings, improper use of tenses, etc).

Occasionally, a consistent pattern of spelling and grammatical errors in a student's writing may suggest the existence of significant knowledge-based errors. In this case, referrals to on-campus Student Writing Centers are appropriate.

## Follow-Up Strategies

At the subsequent class session, microthemes are returned, writing samples read, and students paired for peer debates and

reader-based responses.

Writing Samples. Several model writing samples from the previously assigned microthemes, illustrating the desired level of logical consistency, reliable reasoning, and coherent presentation, are read aloud by the instructor at the subsequent class session. Care is taken to be particularly intentional about presenting at least one writing sample from each student over the course of the term. The motivational effects of hearing one's work read as a model for others - even if only a sentence or phrase - are striking.

Peer Debates. Occasionally, a polarity has generated enough diversity of opinion to warrant a small portion of the subsequent class session for peer debates. During this time, students are matched with a peer who holds a contrasting opinion on this specific polarity. In these matched dyads, each student then provides a brief verbal summary of his or her position. Following these summaries, students point out logical inconsistencies or faulty reasoning in their partner's position.

Peer Reader-Based Responses. Finally, time is allowed for students to provide critical responses to their partner's microtheme. Students are encouraged to be sensitive to three levels of response. At one level, the response centers on their own reading experience. For example, the reader may say: "I was confused here.....". A second level of response involves diagnosis. Here the response lengthens to: "I was confused here because.....". Finally, a third level of response involves

suggestions for remediation. For example, the reader may say: "How about trying.....". It is emphasized that the peer's suggestions for remediation are not prescriptions - as such, responsibility for subsequent corrections still lies with the writer.

## Critical Analysis Paper

Fitzgerald (1987) contends that the essence of writing is rewriting. Rewriting helps the student to rethink. As such, the microthemes only partially promote the quest for identity within psychology. A more detailed critical analysis assignment offers this opportunity for rewriting and clarification of selected microtheme polarities.

Baird (1991) asserts that critical analysis is the ability to differentiate three levels of an idea. These levels are the past, present, and future of an idea. A thorough critical analysis allows one to demonstrate the connections between these levels. It also allows one to compare and contrast differing ideas at any, or all, of the three levels.

### Past

The "past" of an idea refers to: (1) the historical antecedents that led a particular thinker(s) to the idea and (2) the logical presuppositions that must hold in order for the idea to be true.

Historical Antecedents. A general examination of historical antecedents which influenced the particular idea of a thinker might include a discussion of the "Zeitgeist" (i.e., spirit of the times). For example, the absurd conclusions of Pierre-Paul Broca

regarding the intellectual inferiority of females are rendered more understandable - though not excusable - by an examination of his social context. It may be easily demonstrated that his basic assumption that men are more intelligent than women was a prevailing one of the time.

A more specific examination of the relevant historical antecedents for a particular thinker(s) would focus on that thinker's personal history, influential contemporaries, and accessible knowledge. One may cite the influence of Newton's Principia on Locke's desire to describe the universal rules governing the human mind as an example of a specific historical antecedent. In a similar manner, one may detail the influence of Charcot's dramatic and theatrical use of mesmerism on the emerging ideas of Sigmund Freud.

Logical Presuppositions. An examination of the logical presuppositions in the past of an idea would include such questions as: In order for the given idea to be true, what else must first be true? What are the assumptions underlying this idea about people, society, and the natural world? For instance, one may ask what assumptions or presuppositions about people, society, and the natural world lie behind the idea of free will or indeterminism?

Present

The "present" of an idea refers to the simple definition and summarization of an idea as it currently stands. This aspect of the critical analysis should be nonevaluative. For example, the present idea of empirism says that all human knowledge is a result

of direct experience or observation.

Future

The "future" of an idea refers to the implications which follow from a given idea. In other words, if this idea is true, what are the implications which may (must) follow? For example, Walden Two (1948, 1976) depicts the societal implications of an expansive application of Skinnerian behaviorism. An empirist orientation which stresses the equal potential of all human beings and the importance of environmental factors on one's development has tremendous societal and political implications. One may also suggest what other ideas must be false if this idea is true.

I typically assign a critical analysis paper involving the following four ideas: (a) Empirism, (b) Nativism, (c) Determinism, and (d) Free Will. I see these ideas as addressing two of the basic questions of psychology: (1) How do we acquire knowledge? (2) How do we explain our past, present, and future behaviors?

The initial section of the critical analysis paper includes a critical analysis of each of the four assigned ideas. Each critical analysis is directed at the three levels (past, present, and future) described above. One influential thinker (preferably a psychologist) is selected on which to focus in the historical antecedents portion of the "past" of the idea. In the "present" segment, the idea as espoused by this thinker is summarized. Finally, in the "future" section, the implications of this idea for the scientific discipline of psychology are explored. Each analysis stands alone and comparisons are not yet appropriate.

The second section of the critical analysis paper invites the student to compare and contrast the two separate polarities of (a) Empirism and Nativism and (b) Determinism and Free Will. The comparisons focus on the logical presuppositions (past) and implications (future) of the ideas.

The final section of the critical analysis paper allows the student to rethink his or her individual position - as disclosed in the microthemes - in respect to these two issues. Their agreement or disagreement with an idea should not be based on the historical antecedents or representatives of an idea or on the nonevaluative summarization of an idea. Rather, their agreement or disagreement should be specifically aimed at the logical presuppositions (past) and/or implications (future) of the idea.

## Summary

The present article offered several pedagogical strategies intended to promote students' search for identity within the theories and history of psychology course. Short, in-class, contemplative essays (i.e., "microthemes") were suggested to present a structured means of utilizing polarities of psychology to guide students in clarifying their identity within psychology. Peer debates and peer reader-based responses to the microthemes were also suggested as strategies which further this search for identity. Finally, a detailed critical analysis assignment offering an opportunity for rewriting and clarification of selected microtheme polarities was described.

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Table 1

Partial Listing of Major Polarities in Psychology

Atomism vs. Antiatomism (Molecular vs. Molar)

Becoming vs. Being

Conscious Mentalism vs. Unconscious Mentalism

Contentual Objectivism vs. Contentual Subjectivism

Deductivism vs. Inductivism

Determinism vs. Indeterminism (Free Will)

Empiricism vs. Rationalism

Empirism vs. Nativism

Idealism vs. Realism

Mind vs. Body

Naturalism vs. Supernaturalism

Purity vs. Utility

Qualification vs. Quantification

Reductionism vs. Nonreductionism